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ABSTRACT

To investigate the role and portrayal of women in newspapers and to determine trends emerging from this portrayal, a study examined 15 published quantitative research studies (content analyses) on the portrayal of women in newspapers, dating from 1973 until 1988. Studies were gathered primarily from "Communication Abstracts," the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC), "Journalism Monographs," several dissertation and thesis indices, and previous studies. Data gathered included year of publication, size and nature of the sample, qualitative descriptions of the portrayal, and any other pertinent factors that offered a glimpse of how women are portrayed in newspapers' news pages. Analysis indicated that in general, the studies showed a consistent pattern of unequal treatment of women in the news pages. The treatment of women improved only slightly (or not at all) from the time of the 1973 study until recently, despite the entrance of more women into the work force and increasing media coverage given to women's rights. (Thirty footnotes are included, and one table of data and 21 references are attached.) (MM)

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The Portrayal of Women in Newspapers: A Meta-Analysis

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The Portrayal of Women in Newspapers: A Meta-Analysis

Only in the last few decades has research in the mass media focused on the roles women play in the media. Perhaps some of this research was spawned as part of the growing women's movement in the United States, or perhaps it grew out of the increasing number of women joining the workforce since the mid or late 1960s.

Still, much of this gender research in the mass media has centered on the treatment of women in newspaper and magazine advertisements, in television commercials and in the cinema. Much of this research has been qualitative in nature, focusing on the types of roles women play in these media and how they are portrayed compared to their male counterparts.

Describing the way things are in purely quantitative terms obviously does not always give an accurate picture of reality. But quantitative studies at least allow us to "catalogue" a subject, in this case the portrayal of women in newspaper editorial copy, so further assumptions or investigations can be made. Furthermore, while the portrayal of women has been studied in advertisements and on television, only in the last decade or so has the role of women in newspapers' news pages been studied, targeting such portrayal as their appearance as subject of stories, in bylines, and appearances in pictures on newspaper pages.

Methodology and Purpose of Study

It was attempted in this meta-analysis to find all the published quantitative research on the portrayal of women in newspapers. Data gathered includes year of publication, size and nature of sample, qualitative descriptions of the portrayal, and any other pertinent factors that may offer a glimpse of how women are portrayed in newspapers' news pages. Because of the nature of this study, only content analyses were used. The content analysis seemed to be the primary form researchers employed to do this type of studied, although most were accompanied with some narrative information about the nature of the portrayal examined.

Clearly, a survey of quantitative research about this particlar subject leaves many questions unanswered. But taken together, separate studies such as these can possibly point to trends; that is, if all the given research in an area such as portrayal of women in newspapers yields similar results, it is worth noting. And, as will be discussed later in this paper, the given research does point to a "trend."

Many cultural/critical and other qualitative studies have been conducted on women's portrayal in the media -- again, with an emphasis on advertising, television and cinema. In her "Feminist Theories and Media Studies," Steeves does an outstanding job of reviewing many of those studies.[1] Steeves, does, however, also include quantitative research on the subject of women in the media, including content analyses. She notes the drawbacks to these studies: "They do not elaborate theoretically on what is meant by a stereotype, but simply classify character traits that are assumed to reinforce

overgeneralizations in the minds of audience members."[2]

The purpose and nature of meta-research should also be noted. In his 1981 presidential address to the annual conference of the International Communication Association, Everett M. Rogers stressed a need for what he called "meta-research," or a synthesis of all the research done on a specific topic. "Both research and meta-research involve generalization and induction from the empirical level toward higher levels of theoretical abstraction," Rogers said. He explained that meta-research is seen as "the synthesis of primary research results into more general conclusions at the theoretical level. The essence of meta-research is research on research, the analysis of analysis."[3]

The goal of this meta-analysis is to paint a picture of the role of women in newspapers by reviewing studies that examine the issue. The purpose of this research is also to determine if some kind of trend emerges regarding this portrayal. This analysis will also examine to some extent the nature of the portrayal of women in newspapers, some of the reasons for it, and how and if it has changed over the years.

A total of 15 studies are examined, dating from 1973 until 1988. The studies were gathered primarily from Communication Abstracts, ERIC, perusals of Journalism Monographs, several dissertation and thesis indices and from previous studies.

In this meta-analysis, the unit of analysis is usually each study itself, although more than one category from one study is used. (The 1988 Greenwald study, for instance, coded for

treatment of women in newspaper photos and as the subject of women's page stories).

Nothing dealing with gender representation in newspapers' non-advertising space was found before 1973, when the Northern Virginia chapter of the National Organization of Women in Arlington, Va., published a massive study on the subject. That research, a study of content of three months of Washington Post newspapers, examined such topics as gender representation of front-page bylines and Style section bylines, gender representation of obituaries, and "treatment" given to women in the business section and in hard news stories.[4] It appears that the methodology and general nature of that study set the tone for similar research during the next decade. That is, the use of content analysis and coding for such aspects of coverage as women's appearance in bylines, photos and as subjects of stories appears to have been established in the NOW study.

Another early study that appears to have launched others like it was Susan Miller's 1975 analysis of news photographs appearing in The Los Angeles Times and, again, The Washington Post. This study, like the NOW research, showed that women were under-represented in regard to their actual numbers in society. Miller found, among other things, that women were shown in 30 percent of the photographs and men were seen in 81 percent of them.[5] (The numbers here total more than 100 percent because photos were coded for appearance of just women; of just men; and of men and women in the same photo).

Since the mid-70s, most of the studies about female representation in newspapers' news pages have centered around representation in comic strips, in specific sections (such as the

business section and "women's" or style sections), and on the front page. Analyses of gender in bylines also seem to be a common topic.

While gender representation in the content of newspaper stories was the focus of this meta-analysis, it should be noted that at least two of the studies listed center around topics of coverage. The Guenin study, for instance, examined content of "traditional" women's sections as compared to "redesigned" women's sections;[6] the Ryan and Owen's study focused on coverage of social, "racism" and "sexism" issues.[7] These two studies were added to offer a glimpse of how women's "issues" are treated on news pages, and to examine whether the treatment of the issues is in keeping with the representation of women themselves on the news pages.

It should be noted that all of the studies found centered on major newspapers -- that is, newspapers in large cities with large circulations. (A few exceptions to this are Barbara Luebke's study on news about women generated by the wire services,[8] and Diane Silver's comparison of newspaper coverage of males and females in 21 Michigan newspapers.[9]) Perhaps the researchers focused on large-circulation newspapers because they felt they reach the most people; or perhaps they felt them to be the most representative examples of journalism. At any rate, gender representation in small-circulation newspapers is not included in this study for the most part because few studies have been conducted on the subject using small-circulation newspapers.

It should also be noted that most of the studies were conducted by

women (judging by the first names of the researchers). Again, the topic appears to be of interest primarily to female researchers.

Findings

Generally, the studies show a consistent pattern of unequal treatment of women in the news pages. Interestingly, the treatment of women on the news pages seemed to improve only slightly -- or not at all -- from the NOW's 1973 study until recently, despite the entrance of more and more women into the workforce since the mid '70s, and despite increasing media coverage given to the women's "movement" and women's rights. In Graber's 1978 study, women were the subject of 8.6 percent of the stories in the newspapers studied;[10] they were the subject of 7.3 percent of the stories studied in Potter's 1985 study using "elite" newspapers.[11]

The two studies of photographs yielded similar results. In Miller's 1975 study of the content of more than 3,000 news photos in The Los Angeles Times and The Washington Post, the depiction of men outnumbered women by 2 to 1 in the Times, and by 3 to 1 in the Post.[12] Blackwood undertook his 1983 study of women in news photos to determine, he writes, if the role of women in news photos had changed in seven years. Using the same newspapers and similar samples, Blackwood learned that representation of women in news photographs in the two papers had in fact declined. His study showed that women were portrayed in a total of 23.5 percent of the photos, compared to the 41 percent in Miller's study of the subject. Blackwood also noted that these two particular newspapers were used in both studies because "they are commonly accepted as two of the most liberal American newspapers in their portrayals of women."[13]

(It should be pointed out that in both Blackwood and Miller's studies, the numbers can appear misleading. In Miller's study, the percentage of women in the photos represents photos that featured just women, and those that featured women and men. Broken down further, her research shows that 30 percent of the photos featured only women; eighty-one percent featured just men; and 11 percent featured men and women.)

Finally, female representations in bylines should also be noted. According to the NOW study, which focused on bylines, 6 percent of front-page bylines were those of women, while 25 percent of the stories in the "style" sections were written by women.[14] In Greenwald's 1988 study of gender representation in the newspaper business sections of two newspapers, women write 35.5 percent of the business stories. But even with this comparably large number, it should be noted that in the two newspapers studied, the ratio between men and women on the business staffs was nearly 50-50 (with women in the minority). And, in one case, the newspaper employed a female business editor.[15] This points to the fact that even when women are equally represented on an editorial staff -- or even head one -- the editorial representation of women within the pages is still not equal to that of men. This may mean that the emphasis on coverage of primarily men is so ensconced in newspapers that the gender of the editor in charged makes little difference. Or the gender of the editor in charge may have no significance at all concerning what and who is covered on the newspaper pages.

Nature of Portrayal

Merely enumerating the number of times women have appeared on the news pages of newspapers is clearly not enough to establish their portrayal in newspapers. First, the numbers do not offer enough information. Second, each individual content analysis is a snapshot of a certain time period and does not necessarily reflect that particular newspaper on most days. One must certainly look at the nature of their portrayal, as most of the researchers included in this mega-analysis did in their studies.

Blackwood writes that it is important to look at the portrayal of groups, like women, in the media to help determine if, in fact, the media do reflect reality: "It is important...to realize that if newspapers are supposedly representing issues and occurrences in life, then the photos they run should reflect that. Any imbalance in representation would seem to indicate that supposedly factual accounts are in some way removed from fact."[16] Both Blackwood and Miller note that the content of photos in newspapers is particularly important in conveying this reality because photos are often the first place the reader looks, and even those who cannot or will not actually read the newspaper can look at the photos.

Miller notes that the content of the photos was interesting in regard to gender in her study: "The roles of politician/public official, professional, sports figure, entertainer and criminal were overwhelmingly dominated by men...The roles of spouse and other (primarily fashion model) were overwhelmingly dominated by women."[17]

Furthermore, Foreit et. al. found that in the Texas

newspapers they studied, stories about women were much more likely to mention factors like marital status and appearance than stories about men.[18] Similarly, Davis, in her study of 5,500 stories found that men were more likely than women to be the subject of "hard" news stories.[19]

Interestingly, the portrayal of women in newspaper comic strips seems to add considerably to the image of women as weak, sexy creatures or dominating hags. For instance, Thaler, in her study of 40 comic strip characters, notes that many of the male characters drink heavily, while the females nag them about their drinking habits incessantly. "Many of the male characters drink heavily: Frank, Ernest, Mr. Lockhorn, Snuffy (Smith), Thurston in Hi and Lois, Andy Capp, Hagar...and one woman: Broom-Hilda. She is the antithesis of the feminine traits, and she drinks heavily; yet many women in America..are alcoholics. The double standard applies: Men are 'macho' when they indulge; women are unfeminine." Thaler acknowledges that some women characters are more realistic, such as Cathy in the comic strip Cathy. But Cathy and Sally Forth are relatively new entrants into comic strips, and are the exception, not the rule, Thaler indicates.[20]

In addition to Cathy and Sally Forth, however, the world of comic strip characters has paid some attention to women's rights. Brabant and Mooney, in their study of sex role stereotyping in Sunday comics, found female characters in 1984 comic strips were more likely to be seen engaged in home or child care than their counterparts in 1987.[21]

In addition to looking into the quantitative aspect of the

portrayal of women in newspapers and the nature of that portrayal, this meta-analysis briefly examines the ways certain broad issues concerning women are treated. Guenin, for instance, reviews how the renamed "women's sections" of the early '70s have changed their coverage of typically women's issues (stressing things like bridal announcements, club meetings) to issues of more interest to the general public and to women who no longer stay at home all day. She found, however, that coverage of these supposedly more relevant issues did not receive its fair share in the six major newspapers in her study. In most of the sample, "consumer reporting does not get the attention the critics call for," she writes. In addition, little space was devoted to economics and money management, and the women's movement was ignored in three of the papers and made up for 2 percent of the content in the three other newspapers.[22]

Similarly, in a study of the content of eight daily newspapers, Ryan and Owen in 1976 found that only 7 percent of the total coverage was devoted to to what they termed "racism/sexism issues."[23]

These two studies, at least, indicate that women's "issues" (those either about women or of interest to them) are not covered heavily, either in the general news section or the supposedly redesigned women's sections of newspapers.

Reasons for the Portrayal

Clearly, a pattern of underrepresentation of women in newspapers' news columns emerges from this study. This underrepresentation, furthermore, has not seemed to change over the years. Does this indicate there is indeed sexism on

newspapers? And if so, is this sexism intentional on the part of publishers and editors?

The answers to those questions are not immediately clear, although it is perhaps unlikely that an intentional effort is being made to keep women off the news pages of newspapers and to treat them differently from men on those pages. Silver believes that perhaps the very nature of much newspaper coverage lends itself to covering the power structure of the United States -- most of which is made up of men. She writes that several researchers have noted that journalists focus on high-ranking government officials while ignoring the rest of the population.[24] Pingree and Hawkins offer a similar theory; because men have long held the power positions in government and private industry, and the newspaper covers those positions, it is natural that men are the subject of that coverage.[25]

Another problem may exist in the role and function of newspaper "women's" pages. As pointed out in this paper, those pages were changed and renamed in the early and mid 1970s with the intent of changing their content to issues that are relevant to all readers and to women in particular, instead of simply bridal and charity-event announcements. Yet, as some studies have shown, the stress on consumer and social issue news that was supposed to be given to these pages has simply not come about. Further, many believe that any section "devoted" to women's issues such as the women's rights movement, abortion and the like, segregates women in the newspaper and serves to keep them off of the front page and other "hard news" pages where they would be noticed by more

readers.

Pingree and Hawkins point to a study on this issue conducted by Gaye Tuchman. Tuchman reported that the women's-page editor of The New York Times and her staff avoid competing for front-page space so the stories they consider important can be given full space -- including pictures -- on the women's page. In short, the staff considered full coverage inside the paper preferable to perhaps limited coverage on page one.[26] Pingree and Hawkins write that their decisions, "motivated at least in part by feminism, may contribute to lack of coverage of women and women's issues elsewhere in the paper."[27]

Another issue that arises regarding the coverage of women in the newspaper (or lack thereof) is staffing. According to Weaver and Wilhoit, 34.4 percent of the staffs of daily newspapers were made up of women in 1982-1983.[28] Perhaps if women's numbers were greater on these daily newspapers (and their numbers do grow each year), women would make an attempt to cover more women, or at least make an attempt to use women as the sources of stories. This remains to be seen; although one study of female representation in the business sections of two newspapers indicates, as previously noted, that even when a woman is a section editor coverage of women does not dramatically differ from that of a section headed by a man.[29]

Conclusions

This meta-analysis indicates that women and men are not portrayed equally in the news pages of newspapers for several

reasons. First, their sheer numbers are underrepresented; women make up more than half of the world population -- 51 percent -- yet these empirical studies indicate they are not represented in that proportion in any one of the studies. Second, one does not need statistics to show that women do not define themselves entirely in terms of their looks or their spouses, as some of the news pages would imply, nor are they necessarily nagging beings constantly harping at their husbands for their drinking or other nasty habits, as some comic strips would indicate.

Further, the low number of studies on this subject, as well as "gaps" in topics studied also speak to the reasons women are perhaps underrepresented. For instance, no research could be found before 1973, years after the beginning of the most recent feminist movement, and years after women began entering the workforce in large numbers.

And, while examinations of women's representations in advertising, television and media other than newspapers offer insight into women's role in society, those studies appear to be much more prevalent than studies done on female representation in newspapers' editorial space.

Finally, very little research was found about female representation in "women's" sections of newspaper, or the recently renamed "style" or "tempo" sections that formerly were designed primarily for women. In the late 1980s, these "women's" pages -- at many newspapers -- underwent a metamorphosis to include consumer, health and other news of interest to all readers. The daily wedding announcements, recipes and other news aimed solely at female audiences was limited.

It is interesting that little research was found regarding the "women's" pages and their changes, because the subject is somewhat of a controversial one. To some women, the name and format changes were far from liberating. The pages, with some modification, were still a dumping ground for serious news -- for instance, news about the Equal Rights Amendment or job discrimination -- that deserved more prominent, front-page coverage. There, it was trapped with light features and society news, some believed.[26] In addition to denying legitimate women's news its rightful place on page one, some critics believed this treatment further reinforced to women that they were indeed second-class citizens whose activities were not fit for the news pages.

The point here is that it is surprising more studies have not been done on these changes in what were once "women's" pages and the content of those pages.

Whether or not newspapers and newspaper reporters or editors acknowledge it, that medium is a reflection of reality to most of its readers. A medium that is constantly quoting men, portraying men in photos and stories, and designed by men indicates to the reader that it is indeed a man's world. Like users of other media, newspaper readers consciously or unconsciously shape their views of the real world by what they read. The treatment of women as evidenced by nearly all the studies in this meta-analysis seem to diminish their role in society by indicating that men are more worthy of newspaper coverage -- and prominent coverage -- than women.

This portrayal of women in the news pages of newspapers creates a vicious circle. Lack of coverage of women, and a unrealistic portrayal of them, will clearly lead to readers who are uninformed about the activities and importance of women in society. And this in turn will lead to a continuation of the practice of quoting men and using men as the subjects of stories, since this is apparently the "way things are done."

Clearly, the underrepresentation of women in newspapers cannot take the blame entirely for a society that many people think minimalizes women; yet changes in the type of coverage given to them -- quantity and quality -- can certainly help to change the thinking of many. But the issue probably is larger than just newspaper coverage. As long as women are not seen as equal to or as competent as men, it is unlikely their portrayal in newspapers will change.

Author	Topic of study	Sample size	Methodology	Results (% of female representation)
Blackwood (1983)	News photos	3,240 photos	Content analysis	Women in 23.5%
Brabant et. al. (1986)	Sunday comics	79 strips	Content analysis	Women in 59%
Davis (1982)	Subject of news story	5,500 stories	Content analysis	Women in 8.6% *
Foreit et. al. (1980)	Bylines	100 stories	Content analysis	22%
Graber (1978)	"Women's issues" as story content	7,235 stories	Content analysis	4% of stories
Greenwald (1988)	Subject, business stories	296 stories	Content analysis	2% of stories
" " "	Source, business stories	296 stories	Content analysis	6% of stories
" " "	Byline, business stories	296 stories	Content analysis	15% of stories
Guenin (1975)	Coverage of women's movement	24 redesigned women's sections	Content analysis	2% of stories
Luebke (1985)	Subject of wire stories	497 stories	Content analysis	16.5% of stories
Miller (1976)	Stories about women on lifestyle pages	1,022 stories	Content analysis	18% women; 74.5% women and men
Miller (1975)	News photos	3,662 photos	Content analysis	41% of photos*
NOW (1973)	Page one bylines	9 newspapers	Content analysis	9%
Potter (1985)	Subject of page one stories	2,224 stories	Content analysis	7.3% of stories
Ryan, et. al. (1976)	Coverage of "race/sex" issues	48 newspapers	Content analysis	6% of stories
Silver (1984)	Mentions as state officials	251 stories	Content analysis	7% of stories about state officials
Thaler (1977)	Major Character in comics	46 strips	Content analysis	42% of comics

* Percentages with asterisks (*) are based on numbers for portrayals of women alone and women and men. Therefore,

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Footnotes

[1] Steeves, H. Leslie, "Feminist Theories in Media Studies," Critical Studies in Mass Communication, June 1987, 95-136.

[2] Steeves, p. 101.

[3] Rogers, Everett M., "Methodology for Meta Research," paper presented to the International Communication Association, Minneapolis, Minn., 1981.

[4] National Organization of Women, Northern Virginia Chapter, "Newspaper Monitoring Project," Arlington, Va.: NOW, 1973.

[5] Miller, Susan, "Content of News Photos: Women's and Men's Roles," Journalism Quarterly, 52, pp. 71-75.

[6] Guenin, Zena B., "Women's Pages in American Newspapers: Missing Out on Contemporary Content." Journalism Quarterly, 52, 1975, pp. 66-69, 75.

[7] Ryan, Michael, and Owen, Dorothea, "A Content Analysis of Metropolitan Newspapers Coverage of Social Issues," Journalism Quarterly, 54, 1976, pp. 634-640.

[8] Luebke, Barbara, "News about Women on the A Wire," Journalism Quarterly, 62, 1985, pp. 329-333.

[9] Silver, Diane, "A Comparison of Newspaper Coverage of Male and Female Officials in Michigan," paper delivered to the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, Gainesville, Fla., 1984.

[10] Graber, Doris, "Agenda Setting -- Are There Women's Perspectives?" in Women and the News, Epstein, L.K., editor. New York: Hastings House, 1978, p. 28.

[11] Potter, James W., "Gender Representation in Elite Newspapers," Journalism Quarterly, 62, 1985, pp. 636-640.

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26 Tuchman, Gaye, "The Newspaper as a Social Movement's Resource," in Hearth and Home: Images of Women in the Mass Media, Tuchman, Gaye, Daniels, Arlene and Benet, James, editors, New York: Oxford Press, 1978, pp. 186-215.

27 Pingree and Hawkins, p. 124.

28 Weaver, David H1, and Wilhoit, G. Cleveland, The American Journalist, Bloomingon: Indiana University Press, 1986, p. 19.

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30 Van Gelder Lindsy, "You Can't Make News Out of a Silk Purse," Ms., November, 1974, pp. 112, 115-16.

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